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Animals in Christian Theology

Abstract

Animals appear to have been pushed to the margins of Christian theology. Andrew Linzey's pioneering animal theology remedied this but now requires further development. Deeper readings are needed of historical theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Augustine on the topics of reason, rights and analogy. *Physiologus* and later Christian bestiaries must be mined in order to show how animals and other sentient beings, both real and mythical, image Christ and Christian virtues. Furthermore, present-day forms of animal–human relationality, including pet ownership and meat-eating, need to be appraised theologically. The result, achieved via close textual reading, constructive synthesis and interdisciplinary engagement, will be a theological re-evaluation of animals and other sentient beings as moral agents and theological sources.

Dover is the principal English Channel port and has been highly controversial for live animal shipping. In 1976, a young curate living there published a book titled *Animal Rights*. In the book, he accused Christians and Christian theologians of contributing to animal suffering, not least by ignoring it. He made a passionate plea to Christians to take animals seriously as moral patients, that is, as beings deserving of moral consideration by humans.

The book's author, Andrew Linzey, recognized subsequently that his tone had been strident. In a substantial revision of his manifesto published a decade later, *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*, he admitted that his original position had been too polemical and dependent on simplistic theological analysis, and that it had failed to grapple with theological tradition in its full ambiguity (1987, pp. 5–6). In his revised text, Linzey therefore developed several connected theological motifs. Humans, he argued, inhabit a God-centred world in which they are called to reverence all life. The covenant God makes with humans calls them to live in community with animals and redeems violent and sinful human nature, which cause animals so much suffering. Humans should no longer slaughter animals but renounce their destructive treatment of animals, inspired by Christ's renunciation of his own power on the Cross for the sake of the whole world and his transformation of animal sacrifice into self-sacrifice.

Most importantly perhaps, Linzey nuances but ultimately defends his rights-based approach to animals (1987, 68–98). Rights discourse, he contends, may legitimately be applied to the flesh-and-blood beings with which humans share the land and that share with humans the breath of life given by the Spirit. Linzey recognizes that everyday rights language is secular and cannot simply be imported into theology. Theologians therefore need to ground their own rights claims distinctively, in an understanding of God's nature and action. These kinds of theological rights Linzey terms "theos-rights." Key to the concept of theos-rights is stewardship. Because God as creator brings the world into being, all that is in the world is God's property. Humans are mere stewards of that property, with responsibility to care for it, and are answerable to God for how they exercise that responsibility.

In more recent works, Linzey develops these and associated ideas further. In *Animal Theology* (1994) he draws on the notion of reverence for the world developed by Albert Schweitzer. This reverence extends to animals, and includes the following interlinked theological principles: that the weak have moral priority over the strong; that humans are a servant species; and that there is a liberation theology for animals. In a study co-authored with Jewish theologian Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Linzey shows how the compassion that Sherbok sketches is a Christlike principle (1997, pp. 62–90).

1. Beyond Linzey: History, Sources and Agency

Linzey has worked alongside others to put animals onto the agendas of Christian theologians. Notably, Tom Regan and Stephen Clark have made important philosophical and ethical contributions that Christian theologians have rightly recognised as highly relevant to their own work. Yet more

than any other single figure, Linzey has been responsible for the growth among Christians of specifically theological interest in animals, marking out territory, nurturing community and defending both from hostile attacks. But Linzey has not dug deeply enough into Christian tradition to be able to answer, nor even to ask, all the questions that animals pose in Christian theology. Three main areas for discussion may be identified in his work: weak historical theology; insufficient attention to animals as theological sources; and a tendency to regard animals as moral patients deserving of human care, rather than also as moral agents.

My first area of concern, then, are Linzey's broad brush theological narratives. Even in his later writings, these tend to exclude major theological voices that have much to contribute. For instance, viewed with suspicion are Thomas Aquinas (2007, pp. 19, 25; 1994, pp. 12–19, 47, 141; 1987, pp. 16, 25–8, 36) and Augustine (2007, p. 41; 1987, pp. 36, 48, 56), not least because of their "emphasis on rationality" (1994, p. 19), while scholasticism is regarded in consistently pejorative terms as founded on the supreme, rational dominion of humans over nature (2007, p. 109; 1994, pp. 12–15, 26; 1987, pp. 22, 63). But as shall be seen, Augustine's view of the Trinity as having analogues in the world, as well as his wider moralism, helped make animals highly significant to the medieval mind. Moreover, Aquinas' understandings of reason and rights have important implications for understanding animals theologically.

What of Linzey's tendency to see animals more as objects of human theology than as theological sources? Many of the principles he deploys in his animal theology, such as reverence for life, responsibility for the world, the moral priority of the weak, and human servanthood (Linzey 1994), do not originate from reflection on animals and are equally applicable to non-animal contexts. Although Linzey certainly articulates theological principles that shape humans' relations with animals positively, he does not make clear how, if at all, taking animals seriously might impact theological method. Despite Linzey's protestations that theologians have mostly either ignored or denigrated animals, rarely does he allow animal strangeness and otherness to disrupt modern theological categories. In order to show how theologians might not simply take account of animals, but allow theology genuinely to be shaped by animals, I shall devote part of this article to exploring the Christian bestiary tradition.

The third area of concern is a view of animals as moral patients but not agents. This can ironically assume as background a general domination of animals by humans, who are viewed as the only significant actors in the world. Yet beyond the densely populated and highly subjugated landscapes of Europe, some animals are rightly regarded by humans as threatening. Incursions of dangerous animals into schools, suburbs and shopping malls, and of large fish into beach resorts, not to mention attacks by animals on humans in wilderness areas, remind humans of their anthropological vulnerability. Moreover, even in heavily urbanised areas where humans might expect to exercise total power over animals, cases appear in the news of dogs kept as pets turning violent and attacking adults and children. This alternative view of animals as threatening human dominion is a prominent if neglected part of theological tradition, in which animals feature as ministers of suffering, punishment or divine retribution. For example, frogs, gnats, flies and locusts are sent by Yahweh to plague the Egyptians, and thus help release the people of Israel from slavery (Ex. 8–13). There is an urgent need to recover an awareness of animals as theological agents that dismantle structures of anthropocentric pride, which will be pursued through the course of this article.

2. Rereading Theological Tradition

Much of the theological work on animals to date has been in ethics. Vivisection, factory farming and the destruction of animal habitats have all been subjected to suitably vocal critique by theological ethicists, including feminists. Indeed, as previously noted, such issues were the focus of Linzey's early work on animals. Such issues deserve careful academic study, personal reflection, and action by communities and congregations (Hobgood-Oster 2010). But the focus of this article is not how

theologians ethicists should address the widespread and inexcusable human mistreatment of animals. That issue is sufficiently important to require a separate discussion. This article is concerned, in contrast, with the places animals have occupied in Christian theology in the past, and how they might feature in Christian theology in the future.

What might animals be able to teach Christians theologically? A picture of animals as irrational and uncommunicative might suggest very little. But this dim appraisal is more modern than might be realised, grounded more on the technocratic separation of animals from humans characteristic of urbanised late modernity than on serious theological analysis. In order to develop a more positive view of animals' capacity to instruct humans, I shall now delineate a cosmology that gives a more nuanced view of animal natures, capabilities and virtues. Notable in this exposition will be rereadings of Aquinas and Augustine.

a) Thomas Aquinas, Reason and Rights

The angelic Doctor presents a world in which every living creature naturally pursues its *telos* (purpose or goal), which contributes to the world's overall *telos* and ultimate perfection (Clough 2008, 66). Set within this overarching doctrine of creation, Aquinas' theology cannot therefore be seen as placing animals under an unqualified human domination (Wynn 2010). On the contrary, animals just like humans have their own God-given *telos*, and humans should respect that *telos*. Animals are not, of course, identical to humans in all respects. Nevertheless, the precise character of the animal-human difference that Aquinas perceives must be articulated with care. Indeed, the drawing of careful distinctions is a central feature of his methodology, in which difference is seldom presented straightforwardly but instead as equivocal, that is, as incorporating both similarity and dissimilarity. Aquinas recognises that many (but not all) animals possess sensitive souls, including capacities for sensory discrimination, imagination, non-sensate apprehension and memory (Berkman 2009). In other words, many animals possess several of the attributes commonly associated with reasoning. The specific difference Aquinas perceives between human rationality and animal rationality is not that reason is possessed only by humans, but that only humans are capable of deliberation, that is, of the discursive reasoning on which Aquinas bases his own theology. He nevertheless sees animals as possessing instinctual reasoning (Deane-Drummond 2009). This form of reasoning, shared with humans, reflects the divine intellect as its likeness, thereby establishing a principle of participation in the divine life that includes animals.

Advancing beyond these recent revaluations of Aquinas's potential for animal theology, it might be added that he also provides foundations for a Christian concept of rights, or what Linzey terms "theos-rights." Aquinas draws a clear distinction between natural right and positive right, setting both under divine right. Natural right is grounded in reciprocity, such as "when a man gives so much that he may receive equal value in return" or is otherwise satisfied, while positive right is the public recognition and legal enforcement of a natural right (*Summa theologiae* IIaIIae, q. 57, a. 2, *resp.*). This means that positive rights cannot trump natural rights. In other words, in order to be valid and thereby to command assent a law must either express a natural right or not conflict with any such right (*ad 2*). Even divine law, Aquinas implies, does not contradict natural law despite going beyond that law in establishing additional, non-natural laws (*ad 3*). Crucially, in contrast with the views of at least some secular rights theorists, in order to possess a right it is not necessary to articulate that right using language. Rather, natural rights are gifts of God to creatures and express the order God has decreed for the world.

This discussion of Aquinas suggests that he views animals as reasoning beings with God-given purposes that are gifted with natural rights. Animals are, for Aquinas, morally significant as moral patients, deserving of moral consideration by humans in consequence of their place in God's created order. All animals, indeed all living beings, are gifted with the right to inhabit this place in whatever way is most proper to them. It might nevertheless be difficult to see how animals could be moral agents or theological sources, given they can neither form concepts nor communicate in words. Theological communication happens in many more forms than these, however. The

particular form I now wish to explore is that expressed in the Christian bestiary tradition of texts about specific animals, their behaviours, and lessons that humans may draw from those behaviours.

b) Animals as Theological Teachers

Bestiary draws us from Christian cosmology into ethics. But in so doing it draws us further still, into christology. What might animals reveal to humans about the divine, human and animal person at the centre of their faith, Jesus Christ? The seminal Christian text on animals, on which later bestiaries expanded, is *Physiologus*. Drawing on Christian and pre-Christian sources and perhaps compiled in fourth-century Alexandria, *Physiologus* presents animals in overtly theological contexts spliced with biblical citations. In some of its most striking chapters, particular animals are portrayed as analogous with Christ. The lion, “king of all the beasts,” covers his tracks with his tail to obscure his odour from hunters, falls asleep yet keeps a watching eye open, and is born dead and brought to life three days’ later by its father’s breath on its face. These images serve as analogues for, respectively, Christ hiding his divine nature in human flesh, Christ sleeping on the cross while his divine nature keeps watch at his Father’s right hand, and the resurrection of the firstborn (*Physiologus* 2009, 1). Also imaging Christ is the panther. With a variegated coat, it was believed to be friendly towards all animals but in enmity with the dragon, and to sleep for three days after eating before awakening with a loud roar and pleasing fragrance. Similarly, Christ exhibited manifold wisdom, showed his fellow humans friendship yet opposed the devil, and on his resurrection was a pleasant fragrance (xxx; Hassig 1995, pp. 156–66).

Imagery like this might seem fanciful, but consider the power exerted over countless human minds by leonine saviour Aslan in C.S. Lewis’ Narnia chronicles, or the sagacious if prudent Bagheera in Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, pantherine guardian of the child Mowgli, who alone is told of his guardian’s escape from captivity. The images of nobility, salvation, adoption and triumph over suffering and death that these two animals variously present enable them to show forth aspects of the truth of Christ today just as they did in the early Christian centuries.

The pre-eminent animal representation of Christ in the Bible, curiously absent from *Physiologus*, was as a lamb. John the Baptist heralds Christ as “lamb of God” (Jn 1.29) and Christ is depicted as a slain lamb (Rv. 5.6). In John’s Gospel, narrative details suggest that Christ’s crucifixion takes place to fulfil the requirements of the Jewish Passover sacrifice of a lamb (Jn 19.31-4). Moreover, Paul calls Christ the paschal lamb who has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5.7), while 1 Peter describes Christ as the “lamb without spot or stain” (1.19). This imagery is further reinforced in the Christian eucharist, in which *Agnus Dei* is sung or said shortly before communion is received, its words “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

Notwithstanding these mammalian exempla, Christ is represented in *Physiologus* in a greater number of bird forms than animal forms, including as an owl, an eagle, and a plover (*charadrius*). The most enduring image, however, has been that of the pelican. Struck in the face by her chicks but then killing them by striking them back, the mother, moved by compassion, pierced her side on the third day to spill out her blood over their dead bodies in order to revive them. The pelican thereby imaged Christ, who was also scorned by the beings dependent on him yet forgave those beings and shed for them his blood, which became for them a source of life (vi).

In a few cases, living beings are portrayed as embodying specific Christian virtues. The young hoopoe cares for its aged parents (x; Hassig 1995, pp. 93–103). The heron returns to its own nest and obtains its food there, just as Christians should remain faithful to the Church and the spiritual sustenance it provides (xxviii). Through examples such as these, *Physiologus* gave birth to the mature bestiary tradition of later medieval Christendom (surveyed in Rowland 1978, 1973) in which moral instruction was central. In church, these images were communicated not only through ornamentation and stained glass but also in preaching (Owst 1961, 37–9, 195–209). Different exempla are more common today, reflecting the shifting cultural contexts of human-animal contact. The current popularity of farm visitor centres and pet-keeping shows the continuing importance of

animals as sources of ethical instruction, especially for children. They indicate the abiding grip that animals exercise over the human ethical imaginary.

From *Physiologus* onwards, animals were not used in positive representation alone. They also imaged an amalgam of vice and heresy. Such animals included the cat (known for its secrecy), the moth (gnawing at the Church as at King Solomon's garments in Sir. 42.13), the mole (blind to truth), and above all the ravaging wolf (Kienzle 2007). The fox, festering in its dark underground passages, was seen to represent the devil (Hassig 1995, pp. 62–71). Notably, these are not animals living far removed from humans, but mammals that threaten human environments precisely through being enmeshed in them.

A great strength of the bestiary tradition is that it depicts living beings in their full diversity. "Animals" are too often presented as a generic category, as if there were no difference between a dog or a bear, a wolf or a mouse. This occlusion of difference is a tendency even among scholars working on animals, who have developed the category of "human animal" in order to make clear that humans are animals too. But this categorisation is in danger of perpetuating the notion that the "human" designates a uniquely differentiated ontological category. Indeed, in so far as the "animal" category purports to encompass fish, birds and insects, it risks further homogenising the tremendous diversity of sentient life. In fact, it makes no more sense to speak of "human animals" than of "feline animals." Each of these verbal manoeuvres shifts focus away from the particular onto the generic, thus hindering appreciation of the specific grace offered by each living being. The contrasting portrayal of living beings as diversely mirroring theological and ethical truths unsettles humans' understanding of their own place in the world. It is against this background that the apparently anthropocentric theology of figures like Aquinas needs to be set (Yamamoto 1998). His theological distinctions presupposed broader and deeper continuity between different elements of the created order that contemporary readers would have taken for granted.

In the present day, ethologists are rediscovering the full extent of animal morality, uncovering what Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce (2009) have described as an "embarrassment of riches." By observation, humans may, again in Bekoff and Pierce's words, "look for the good" in animals in much the same way as have Christian moralists in past ages, whose intuitions are confirmed by this research. Moral qualities are associated with particular species: the fairness of capuchin monkeys; the empathy of diana monkeys, elephants and mice; sharing by bats; the reciprocity of rats, impala and savanna baboons; and co-operation within wolf packs. Bekoff and Pierce also recognise animals to be capable of immorality and cruelty, especially predators (2009, 15–19).

This renewed human openness to the idea that animals have morals rests on a new human recognition that animals have emotional lives and that humans coexist with animals in a relation of compassion understood in a broad and deep sense. In Christian theology, compassion is not simply a feeling of benevolence nor even of generosity, but a profound relationality grounded in mutual feeling and recognition. Bekoff (2010, 9–10) suggests that, when humans expand their "compassion footprint" to encompass animals, animal personality, which includes morals, comes to influence human personality and morals. This implies an understanding of animals as beings capable of drawing humans into a deeper understanding of reality. It is to the understanding of reality that I shall now turn.

c) Augustine, Analogy and Myth

Augustine's view of animals has, like Aquinas's, been assessed negatively. Robert Wennberg, for example, charges Augustine with promoting a view of animals as possessors of merely instrumental value deriving from their usefulness to humans. Drawing on arguments of Richard Sorabji (1995), Wennberg argues that Augustine espoused a Stoic view of animals as dispossessed of reason and therefore undeserving of moral concern (2003, pp. 302–6). This judgment ignores, however, the complex relation Augustine sees in his seminal work *On Christian Doctrine* (1995, 1.39–85) between use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*). The same item or being may simultaneously be used and enjoyed.

Given that Augustine makes no explicit judgment of animals as purely instrumental, it is legitimate to deploy his theological framework to argue that they are not necessarily instrumental. Indeed, this issue helps clarify the status of animals in the bestiary tradition that was discussed in the previous section. When employed as objects of human reflection, animals are undoubtedly “used.” But they may also be “enjoyed,” that is, regarded as subjects with whom humans find an enduring relationality that is not annihilated by a misplaced human desire to consume the other or restrict the other’s freedom.

Furthermore, Wennberg’s negative appraisal of Augustine takes no account of the latter’s huge influence on the later bestiary tradition. As Guy Mermier states, all [sic] bestiaries “owe their origin and use to the Augustinian concept that the symbol gives man the means to understand himself” (1989, p. 69). Augustine developed the Platonic distinction between things and signs, recognising explicitly that animals are givers of signs and that animals featuring in scripture have special significance (1995, 2.4; 141). A lion, for example, could be regarded either as simply a lion, or in addition as a sign communicating a truth beyond it, such as Christ’s victory over sin and death (3.79). Other living beings that Augustine uses to expound his theory of signs include the ox, serpent, dove, and fish (2.33; 60; 3.101).

Augustine believed that, by both natural observation and scriptural reading, Christians might gain understanding of signs and the true realities they signified. This supposes a close relationship between world and scripture. Indeed, some bestiaries opened with the initial chapters of Genesis, with living beings divided into the categories there presented: quadrupeds, birds, fish, and reptiles (Yamamoto 2000, pp. 19–20). Under the influence of Ambrose’s *Hexameron*, the natural world was read through a scriptural lens as the place in which moral truth was exhibited. Scripture was regarded as pointing beyond itself to the literal truths written in the world by God at its creation.

Yet the ordinary sentient beings that humans would see in daily life were not always able to bear the fullness of truth that theologians saw in faith and articulated through images, especially when related to the person of Christ. Animals and birds beyond the experience of most humans were often used to represent Christ (Yamamoto 2000, p. 27), such as the lion and panther as previously discussed. Furthermore, legendary additions to the animal kingdom were made in order to signify this excess of theological meaning beyond that exhibited in the real world. The most widespread example is the phoenix, a mythical bird of incredible lifespan that revived itself from out of its own ashes following voluntary immolation on its nest-pyre, coming back to life as a worm that sprouted wings after emerging from its decomposing flesh (*Physiologus* ix; Hassig 1995, pp. 72–83). The phoenix obviously represented the resurrected Christ. This association was strengthened in some Greek accounts, which reported that it fed not on physical food but on the Holy Spirit (Mermier 1989).

The example of the phoenix shows how Christian theologians have employed animal and avian imagery drawn from pre-Christian traditions, transforming it to serve their purposes (Van Den Broek, 1972). Some Christian theologians might be uncomfortable with this, viewing it as a syncretistic smuggling of paganism into Christian doctrine. But to take animals seriously in theology requires recognition of their perennial significance for human culture. It is via this cultural significance that animals might once again become theologically significant for humans.

3. Towards a Relational Theology

Humans enjoy a range of relationships with animals. The theological significance of animals is intimated in narratives from Christian tradition, including extra-canonical texts and the lives of Desert Fathers and later saints (Grumett 2010; Hobgood-Oster 2008, pp. 42–80; Linzey 2007, pp. 95–113; Waddell 1996). For example, Saint Philip Neri, founder of the Oratorians, is invoked along with Francis in the Roman Catholic Catechism for his gentleness to animals, which included vegetarianism (Jones 2009, pp. 74–5). Yet although this view of close animal–human relationships is especially relevant in a post-Darwinian scientific context, theologians have so far been largely unreceptive to its implications (Clough 2009a).

What types of animal–human relationship are significant today? The first I shall consider is the keeping of animals by humans as pets. Animals living with humans in their homes sometimes perform crucial practical tasks, especially if their owner has a disability, with such animals increasingly designated “service animals.” But more frequently, animals are kept in the home simply as companions. Stephen Webb (1998) has addressed this theologically neglected topic and opened important new perspectives. The pet relationship, he argues, is founded on an acceptance of interdependence and its corollaries, which include communication, training, response, feeling, friendship and love. Pets thereby become channels of grace, and pet–owner relationships are contexts in which grace is experienced. Rights discourse, in contrast, is grounded in notions of autonomy and distance that can actually undermine humans’ relationality with animals.

This is a different kind of relationship from that represented analogically in *Physiologus*. Analogy, Webb contends, pictures the unknown in terms of the known, and is therefore posited more on sameness than on difference. He offers in response a theology of excess, of extravagant “different difference” in which more is received than is given and which can thereby “empower our lives with an outward emanating care” (p. 101). Webb rightly cautions against essentialising animal natures and behaviours under generic categories, urging us rather to remain attuned to moments and relationships in which grace is experienced and circles of care are expanded. Canine generosity is not simply an ethical model from which humans may learn, but a grace offered freely and unconditionally. Webb states: “Dogs are a form of excess, an embodiment of hyperbole, and thus they extend and amplify our emotions and perceptions along unpredictable and immeasurable paths” (p. 98). Although dogs and other animals stretch human imaginations, they are not wholly other. Rather, their “difference from us is both distant and intimate, drawing us out of ourselves and toward that which we can never fully know” (p. 100).

Animals are also significant in the large majority of Western households as meat. The consumption of meat is an increasingly contested human activity, not least because of the large adverse ecological impacts made globally by the meat industry. Furthermore, back to nature movements and television shows have begun to dissolve the modern invisibility of animal slaughter in the Western world, bringing a new awareness that meat is the bloody chopped-up body parts of an animal that has been killed. In Christian history, efforts have often been made to limit or otherwise control meat-eating. Animals have thereby powerfully affected human life and spirituality even after their death and total objectification as meat. The complex motivations behind the food laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy have remained potent in Christianity, whether in monastic abstinence from quadruped flesh, the Celtic revival of Mosaic dietary law, legally-enforced Lenten abstinence from meat, the Reformers’ promotion of voluntary abstention, or modern vegetarianism’s Christian origins (Grumett and Muers 2010; Grumett 2008, 2007). Furthermore, in many Orthodox churches the persistence of Christian liturgies of animal slaughter, both formal and folk-based, points to a visceral awareness of the sacredness of animal life that suggests that the killing of any animal by humans is theologically problematic. Viewing animals as potentially on or off the menu opens a provocative range of theological topics including desire, abstinence, feasting, bodily boundaries, purity, hospitality, ecology and violence. These topics are of interest and relevance to all humans who eat meat, not just to Christians. To focus on animals via their use as food sources might therefore be one way of expanding the circle of people engaged in theological reflection.

Conclusion

The time has arrived for theologians to leave behind caricatures of Christian tradition. In order to overturn received interpretations, deep reading of primary texts like those of Aquinas and Augustine will be required. Animal theologians should no longer revel in marginality, but reclaim their historic place in mainstream theological tradition. Yet although animals are far more central in that tradition than is usually recognised, particular theologians’ discussions of animals are nevertheless sometimes diffuse and contradictory (Clough 2009b). Synthesis also therefore needs to be pursued,

by present-day theologians bold enough to construct narratives and not just to retrieve fragments. In addition to this specifically theological enterprise, theologians need to cross disciplinary boundaries, such as by connecting animal theology and the bestiary tradition with work by ethologists such as Marc Bekoff. Although animals certainly do not require human assistance to interpose themselves into theological representation and discourse, how their place in theology is articulated and evaluated will depend on the next generation of human students and researchers.

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